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THE PLEASURES OF WRITING AND READING

In this article, I would like to suggest an answer to the question why Vladimir Nabokov, in *Strong Opinions*, claims that «<... the pleasures of writing...> correspond exactly to the pleasures of reading»¹. According to Nabokov, that's why there is no need to «analyze delights that both sides know»².

The questions *in what way* and *why* the pleasures of writing and reading should correspond «exactly» gain in importance when we remind ourselves of Nabokov's poetics which appears to be centrally focused on the Author. In *Strong Opinions*, for example, he says that «an artist's best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning»³ and in *Lectures on Literature* he reminds his students that he has tried to teach them «to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author»⁴. Maurice Couturier believes that such statements, in accordance with Nabokov's writing practice, prove that in Nabokov's world the relation between an author and his reader cannot but result in an unequal fight⁵. In his lectures, however, Nabokov reveals the clear objective to turn his students into good readers, which means that he doesn't think the fight is automatically lost in advance. Furthermore, Nabokov's own descriptions of the processes of writing and reading suggest some kind of equality between the position of the writer and that of the reader. In elaborating this proposition I will rely on some of Leland de la Durantaye's findings developed in his book *Style is Matter*⁶. But let's start with a closer look at these descriptions.

In the same passage in which he claims the exact correspondence between the pleasures of writing and reading, Nabokov says that the writer owes this pleasure to «the unknown force in his mind that has suggested a combination of images»⁷. For Nabokov, literary inspiration is in the first place a matter of *images* and not of words or phrases that can cross an author's mind. This doesn't mean that Nabokov considers words and language as a necessary evil, or as of secondary importance. A novel, short story or poem just isn't originally conceived in an author's

¹ Nabokov V. *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage, 1990. P. 40.

² Ibid. P. 41.

³ Ibid. P. 18.

⁴ Nabokov V. *Lectures on Literature* / Ed. by Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P. 382.

⁵ Couturier M. Nabokov, ou la tyrannie de l'auteur. Paris : Seuil, 1993. P. 391.

⁶ Durantaye L. *de la. Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2007.

⁷ Nabokov V. *Strong Opinions*... P. 40.

mind in words. Therefore the most important antithesis is not the one between images and words, but the one between images and ideas:

«After all we should always bear in mind that literature is not a pattern of ideas but a pattern of images. Ideas do not matter much in comparison to a book's imagery and magic. <...> The word, the expression, the image is the true function of literature. Not ideas»⁸.

So Nabokov's «image» is a truly sensory phenomenon instead of an abstract, intellectual concept. It's the imagination working at its full potential, inciting not just the inner eye but also other «inner equivalents» of the senses. But what does this image show us, and how is this inspiration turned into words?

In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov regularly comments on his working methods. At first he used to write with a pen in exercise books, he claims, but in the late thirties, beginning with *The Gift*, he switched to the method of writing with a pencil on index cards, which was more appropriate to take down on paper what he called «the mental composition» of the novel⁹. The reason for this is that in Nabokov's case the actual writing of the novel is preceded by «a curiously clear preview of the entire novel»¹⁰. This preview can thus be considered as the final stage in and of the working of Nabokov's inspiration, and can therefore be described as being of a visual, plastic rather than conceptual nature. Since time and sequence don't exist in an image, writing chronologically is a difficult thing to do. Writing on index cards helped Nabokov to face this problem, as he describes in *Strong Opinions*:

«Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete»¹¹.

Mark that in this passage Nabokov uses the term «painting» to talk about the status of the «entire novel before it is written». The noun «painting» is more

⁸ Nabokov V. Lectures on Russian Literature / Ed. by Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. P. 166.

⁹ Nabokov V. Strong Opinions... P. 68-69.

¹⁰ Ibid. P. 69.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 32.

special and certainly more specific than the noun «image» or «picture», and therefore reveals more about Nabokov's conception of the actual creativity that is involved in the action of writing and reading. Not surprisingly, the key to the correspondence between the pleasures of writing and reading can be found in this association of the novel with a painting.

Nabokov's essay «The Art of Literature and Commonsense»¹² helps to explain this connection. The text focuses, among other things, on Nabokov's distinction between what he calls «two types of inspiration», namely «vostorg» and «vdokhnovenie». He translates these Russian terms as «rapture» and «recapture», saying that the main difference between the two is of a climatic kind, *vostorg* being «hot and brief» and *vdokhnovenie* «cool and sustained»¹³. Nabokov emphasizes that *vostorg* «has no conscious purpose in view», and describes this first type of inspiration as follows: «<...> the most natural form of creative thrill – a sudden live image constructed in a flash out of dissimilar units which are apprehended all at once in a stellar explosion of the mind»¹⁴. This is the very first, initial stage of inspiration: the old world has given rise to a new imaginary one. The next step is the actual composing of the book, which Nabokov calls the «reconstructive work»¹⁵, for which the writer has to rely on *vdokhnovenie*. In other words, *vdokhnovenie* must be understood as a writer's capacity and talent to capture and recapture in words the world and the story given to him by his pictorial inspiration. Explaining that working chronologically isn't necessary, Nabokov develops the crucial line of thought that leads us to the reader:

*«You might if you choose develop any part of the picture, for the idea of sequence does not really exist as far as the author is concerned. Sequence arises only because words have to be written one after the other on consecutive pages, just as the reader's mind must have time to go through the book, at least the first time he reads it. Time and sequence cannot exist in the author's mind because no time element and no space element had ruled the initial vision. If the mind were constructed on optional lines and if a book could be read in the same way as a painting is taken in by the eye, that is without the bother of working from left to right and without the absurdity of beginnings and ends, this would be the ideal way of appreciating a novel, for thus the author saw it at the moment of its conception»*¹⁶.

So the ideal way of reading enables a reader to experience the novel in exactly the same way as the author saw it at the moment of *vostorg*: as a picture, a painting in which time and sequence do not exist. Because of the physical form of

¹² Nabokov V. The Art of Literature and Commonsense // Nabokov V. Lectures on Literature... pp. 371-380.

¹³ Ibid. P. 378.

¹⁴ Ibid. P. 378; 379.

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 379.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 379-380.

literature the writer has to break up this image into several successive little parts, rendered into words, which is an action that requires time. This is *vdoknovenie*. The reader in his turn needs some time to recreate the image out of these little parts. But is it at all possible to read a novel in the same way we look at a painting?

Nabokov offers an answer to this question in the essay «Good Readers and Good Writers»¹⁷. He makes an important remark on reading: «one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader»¹⁸. Why is that so? Nabokov explains that the physical act of reading, namely moving your eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, stands in the way of artistic appreciation. The reason is that this process takes time, unlike when we are faced with a painting. A first look at a painting doesn't require moving your eyes from left to right to get a view of the whole. But when confronted with a book, we do not have a physical organ, equal to the eye, that enables us to take in the whole picture first and enjoy the details afterwards. A good reader therefore reads a book several times because then he can approach the book in the same way he approaches a painting: he has an image of the entire novel from the beginning, so that he can fix his attention on the detailed little parts that construct this image instead of on constructing the image itself. Theoretically speaking, the reader can take over the writer's working method: he can ignore chronology and choose to lift out any part he wants.

So actually, in Nabokov's opinion, a reader can attain true artistic appreciation when he behaves towards a book not unlike an author does: starting from the image of the novel in its entirety to concentrate on its parts. Nevertheless, we can presume that it is possible for a reader to compose the «painting» of a novel on the basis of one reading. We might actually say that the action performed by the reader the first time he reads a book includes the inverse mental operation of writing it. The following quote proves that Nabokov believes that readers play an important active and creative role in performing this process:

*«Literature must be taken and broken to bits, pulled apart, squashed – then its lovely reek will be smelt in the hollow of the palm, it will be munched and rolled upon the tongue with relish; then, and only then, its rare flavor will be appreciated at its true worth and the broken and crushed parts will again come together in your mind and disclose the beauty of a unity to which you have contributed something of your own blood»*¹⁹.

If reading is the inversion of writing then, and if it is possible for a reader to experience a novel like the author did at its conception, namely like an image, then

¹⁷ Nabokov V. Lectures on Literature... pp. 1-6.

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 3.

¹⁹ Nabokov V. Lectures on Russian Literature... P. 105.

it's also conceivable that author and reader occupy similar or even equal positions in the process of literary communication. But Nabokov didn't say that «writing» and «reading» correspond exactly, it were more specifically «the pleasures of writing and reading» that «both sides» knew. In what way do reading and writing arouse corresponding pleasures then?

In the same passage in which he compares the pleasures of writing and reading, Nabokov declares that he always told his students that «the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel»²⁰. So it's in the spine that the joint pleasures of writers and readers must be located. As Leland de la Durantaye remarks, the spine plays an important role throughout Nabokov's work, being described as, for example, «the seat of artistic delight» where the «little shiver» occurs which Nabokov calls «the highest form of emotion»²¹. If we remind ourselves of the fact that for Nabokov, artistic appreciation is based on the perception of the novel as a painting, an image, it will be obvious that the experience itself of this image, as a writer or a reader, is the pleasure Nabokov is talking about. This pleasure doesn't only occur when an author or a reader considers the novel-painting in its entirety, but at every moment this image or its verbal reproduction is growing, expanding and becoming more vivid. The writer experiences the pleasure when he gets inspired and when he finds himself able to paint his words like a painter who's building up his picture. The reader on the other hand knows the same delight each time the world invented by the author springs to life. Since this is a sensory experience, it is no surprise that Nabokov equalizes «true art» to «the literature of the senses»²². De la Durantaye relies on Nabokov's following remark to draw some interesting conclusions. In his lecture on Kafka's *Metamorphosis* Nabokov writes that

«Of course, no matter how keenly, how admirably, a story, a piece of music, a picture is discussed and analyzed, there will be minds that remain blank and spines that remain unkindled. <...>We can take the story apart, we can find out how the bits fit, how one part of the pattern responds to the other; but you have to have in you some cell, some gene, some germ that will vibrate in answer to sensations that you can neither define, nor dismiss»²³.

De la Durantaye defines two categories to clarify Nabokov's thoughts about a reader's relation to literature. He concludes that a reader certainly needs literary intelligence, but that he can't truly appreciate a work of literature without a literary sensitivity. In addition to this de la Durantaye writes, not surprisingly, that the aesthetic experience of a *writer*, which is literary inspiration, can be found to be described by Nabokov as being of the same nature.²⁴

²⁰ Nabokov V. Strong Opinions... P. 41.

²¹ Durantaye L. de la. Style is Matter... pp. 57-60.

²² Nabokov V. Lectures on Literature... P. 237.

²³ Ibid. P. 251.

²⁴ Durantaye L. de la. Style is Matter... P. 57.

My proposition is to compare and maybe even equate Nabokov's own concepts of *vostorg* and *vdokhnovnie* with those of de la Durantaye, since they represent respectively the more sensitive and the more intellectual aspect of Nabokov's notion of literary inspiration. In a certain way, this parallel sheds a different light on Nabokov's statement that he writes for fellow-artists and follow-artists²⁵, which belongs to the same paragraph in *Strong Opinions* as the one about writing and reading. It doesn't appear anymore as the «very elitist theory of literary exchange» that Maurice Couturier believed it to be²⁶. The truth might be that Nabokov was saying that some readers could become his equals, because good readers and good writers share similar literary qualities, sensitive and intellectual, albeit adapted to their different roles towards literature. In reading, a reader has to exercise the same sort of faculties a writer makes use of when he creates a novel. Nabokov himself seems to be aware of this vague boundary when talking about his novel *Lolita*. He tells the journalist that

«She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle – its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look»²⁷.

If Nabokov composed and solved his riddles and puzzles at the same time, it's no wonder he saw himself as his own ideal reader. After all only the author knows what the novel looks like in his own imagination and it's not likely that his reader will be able to reconstruct it in *exactly* the same way. A good reader, however, is «bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author, but those efforts can be most rewarding after the bright dust has settled»²⁸. As his lectures clearly show, Nabokov wanted to grant his students this reward by turning them into good readers, readers that use their spine, their literary sensitivity in addition to their literary intelligence. In «Good Readers and Good Writers» Nabokov depicts both a writer's and a reader's efforts and rewards in a beautiful metaphorical way. This quotation serves as the perfect conclusion:

«Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever»²⁹.

²⁵ Nabokov V. *Strong Opinions*... P. 41.

²⁶ Couturier M. Nabokov, ou la tyrannie de l'auteur... P. 393.

²⁷ Nabokov V. *Strong Opinions*... P. 20.

²⁸ Ibid. P. 183.

²⁹ Nabokov V. *Lectures on Literature*... P. 2.